

HIS COUNTRY AT LAST ACCLAIMS DELIUS

To Frederick Delius the British composer has come a rare popular triumph after years of comparative obscurity. His works have been honored in London with a six-day festival, and though blind and paralyzed, he has, unlike Beethoven, been able to hear them and the acclamations they received. The following article tells of his peculiar genius and of the efforts made in his behalf for recognition.

By KENNETH NEWMAN

LONDON.

FREDERICK DELIUS has become famous lately, especially in England. Previously he was known, but not famous in the popular acceptance of the word. Now he is front page matter, and that without having murdered his wife, as Gesualdo did, or appropriated some one else's wife, as Wagner did, or done any of the other things that are culminated to win a composer respectful treatment from the subeditors. A few well-informed people had known for years that Delius was a remarkable composer; at last the general public has discovered the fact.

It really means something when an English composer who has no academic or professorial associations is taken notice of by the powers that be. As a rule, a knighthood means nothing. In England we do not so much knight people as professorial posts, or cathedral organs, or an orchestra, or perhaps simply longevity. We would probably not have knighted a Wagner because he was neither a professor nor an organist nor a septuagenarian composer who has seen better days, but we would certainly have knighted a Rheinberger because he played the organ, or a Lachner because he was a court conductor, or a Hanslick because he lectured at a university, or even an Offbach because he wrote a sort of music that a morose and his legislators could understand. It has been said that Elgar owed his Order of Merit not to the fact that

After Relative Obscurity England's Great Composer, Now Blind and Paralyzed, Hears His Public Triumphs

festival. There was, to be sure, a slight touch of exaggeration in Beecham's statement, for obviously what we had heard during the six days represented to a large extent the pick of Delius's work; but it is still true that there remains over a vast amount of fine music, not a note of which has ever been heard in public in England.

Who, then, some of my American readers may ask, is this Delius, and why is he still not better known to concert and opera goers in gen-

eral all the world over? I will try to answer the latter question first. In the first place, Delius has never made the slightest effort to force himself on the public. Like another great contemporary, Sibelius, he is essentially an intellectual solitary. Having always been economically independent, he has been able to indulge himself in the luxury of writing just what he wants to write for the pure pleasure of writing it. Naturally, he has no objection to being performed, and is not so foolish as to despise popularity; he was obviously gratified by the remarkable evidence that was given during the festival of the esteem in which the London public held him.

But it is not in his nature to run after the public, or to adopt any of the quite legitimate means which other composers, be their idealism what it may, have to

adopt in order to obtain and hold their footing in the world. His vogue in England is due almost entirely to Sir Thomas Beecham, who began his devoted labors on behalf of Delius as long ago as 1908. It is true that during the last few years some of the smaller orchestral works, such as "Brigg Fair," "Summer Night on the River" and "On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring," have become part and parcel of the ordinary English concert repertoire. But it is probable

music, some of which was issued with the minimum of indications as to phrasing and so on.

This of itself is typical of Delius. It is not that as a composer he is impractical, but that he does not realize how things look to other people. He creates for himself, and to himself—and I may add, to Sir Thomas Beecham and Miss Beatrice Harrison and one or two other artists who are spiritually in rapport with him his intentions are so clear that it never occurs to

all the time, and nothing was heard of the music. Beecham made up his mind that they would have to listen to it; so he devised a little stage business to accompany the music and as the curtain remained up the public now refrained from conversation.

In the second place, Delius is difficult to fit into any of the categories so beloved of the general public. They like to know, or to think they know, what a composer "stands for." It has always been the peculiarity of Delius that he defied categorization. He belongs to no party, no national or other school; and the result is that he has never had a party or a school to push his claims. Not being a university man, and having nothing in common with the standardized university type of mind, he could not count. In his earlier days on the support of what was at one time the most powerful clique in English musical life. It was Elgar's great service to destroy the influence of this clique by showing that a composer who owed nothing whatever to it could do what no university musician had ever succeeded in doing—make an international reputation for himself and for English music, an offense for which the clique found it hard to forgive him.)

NOR has Delius been any more fortunate in other respects. Neither he nor his music has any "national" characteristic so marked as to make it possible for any nation to take him up and exhibit him as its own. He was born in England in 1862 (not 1863, as the dictionaries say), of German parents. Germans cannot see anything typically German in him, while to English people he is not typically English as, for example, Elgar is. At the age of 17 he was sent to Germany to study with his father, a Bradford merchant in the wool trade. In 1882 he entered a Manchester office. His father having refused to allow him to devote himself to music, he was given an orange grove in Florida in the summer of his time study, counterpoint and soaking himself in the atmosphere of the place and in Negro melody; his impressions of this period are recorded in his "Appalachia."

In 1886 his parents, recognizing that they could do nothing with him, allowed him to go to Leipzig to study. He was one of those artists, however, who can learn only in their own way; they instinctively know what they need for their own self-development, pick out from their environment what will conduce to this and let the rest go by. Of far more influence than Jadassohn and Rehncke was Grieg whom Delius met in Leipzig in 1887, and to whom he owed that acquaintance with Scandinavia that has given his mentality a slightly northern cast. He married a Scandinavian woman, Jelka Rosen, in 1887. After some further wandering he settled at Grez-sur-Loing in France, in the same year and apart from an interruption caused by the war, Grez has been his home ever since.

The queer result of it all has been that a German by ancestry, born in Eogland and largely molded by Florida and Scandinavia, has spent the greater part of his mature life in "relative seclusion" in France. There he has had little public success; anything less likely than the music of Delius to command itself to the rather narrow French view of music could hardly be imagined. Though some of his works have made a great effect in Germany, his music is not German enough for the Germans to be able to regard him as part of their tradition, nor is it English enough for it to have formed a party for him in England. His music is simply himself. Frederick Delius; and I doubt

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Frederick Delius.

A Recent Sketch by Augustus John. Courtesy of Arthur Tooth & Sons, London.

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that the almost excessive concentration on these works has done Delius as much harm as good. They are all, to the superficial listener, very much in the same mood and built up in the same way; and they have contributed largely to the legend that all his music is alike in idiom and in outlook.

The bigger works, as well as some of the smaller ones that are most characteristic of his genius, have been relatively neglected for a variety of reasons. They were often technically difficult; they were so personal in their expression that only performers tuned, as it were, to his own wave length, could discover and reveal the secret of them; and, curiously enough, they had been published in forms that did anything but lighten the task of the interpreter. This is particularly true of the chamber

him that the most intelligent and most willing of performers can be assisted in his comprehension of a work by a few accents and slurs and other little suggestions. I understand that Sir Thomas Beecham has taken in hand the business of preparing new editions of some of the works. It will be interesting to compare these with the ones now current.

No one understands Delius as Beecham does; one is almost tempted to say that he understands Delius better than Delius does himself. I will give one example of how his more practical sense has made the seemingly impracticable Delius more practicable. In the opera "A Village Romeo and Juliet" there is a descriptive orchestral extract that is, on the whole, the loveliest thing in that lovely opera. What happened? The curtain being down, of course the audience talked

DELIUS has been known to escape a recognition, but he has been made a companion of Honor. That is a new order, and so far the company is fairly good. Anyhow, the conferring of the distinction served to focus public attention on him, and he came right out into the limelight when a six days' festival, organized by Sir Thomas Beecham, showed the generally what manner of composer Delius is. After that, there was no question that he had "arrived."

When the news leaked out, some months earlier, of Beecham's intention to devote six concerts to the orchestral and chamber music of Delius, there was much head-shaking in London musical circles. Delius was a fine composer, every one admitted; but could the public, could even his friends and admirers, stand six days of him? Was not one work of his, when all was said, very like another the same recurrent six-four lilt, the same sliding chromatics, the same vagueness and elusiveness of atmosphere in them all?

Well, the London public took six days of Delius, and was amazed to find in the first place how different one work really was from another; and in the second place how many admirable works Delius had written, of which the average man knew nothing, or next to nothing. And when, on the final night of the festival, I think it was Sir Thomas Beecham, in a speech from this platform, assured the audience that, so far from their having heard the whole of Delius's more significant music, he could fill another six programs with works equally significant, every one was ready to believe him, so overpowering had been the cumulative effect of the

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whether so curious a case has happened before in the whole history of music.

A more denationalized mind could not be conceived in music; and it is easy to see how this peculiarity of his has operated to his disadvantage so far as performances are concerned. His denationalization shows itself in sundry other little ways. His English, while of course thoroughly correct and idiomatic, has something in its inflections that, to my own knowledge, has made people who have met him casually and who knew nothing of his antecedents regard him as a "foreigner."

The basis of his accent is his native Yorkshire. This local tang he has never lost; but an indefinable something else has been superimposed upon it in the course of the years. On the other hand, representatives of other nations have assured me that his accent in their languages is not that of a native. There are many passages in his settings of English poetry that, while showing the utmost sensitiveness to the poetic content, suggest a lack of feeling for the specific genius of the English language qua language; and I should not be surprised to hear that his settings of French and German poems create the same impression on Frenchmen and Germans.

HIS conversation gives one the same feeling of a mind wholly individual, non-party and non-national. He thinks along none of the traditional local lines; he sees everything in life and literature from his own angle, an angle determined by the years-long impact on him of many varieties of national impression. He is, in short, a type of which there is only one representative—himself. When I first met him, many years ago, it was a great refreshment and a great illumination to me, immersed as I was in the English cultural tradition, to see how the Englishman

the type of the Englishman was

in my years the Englishman left

London after the conclusion of the recent festival. He is now blind and paralyzed, but his mind functions with the old vigor and the same independence; even the voice has preserved its characteristic resonance and timbre.

His conversation then, as earlier, gave the impression of a personality of great concentration and driving force. His head and face are those of a man who can be warranted not to be turned from his self-chosen path by any obstacle; and his sharp-cutting intonation and staccato delivery go perfectly with his clear judgments upon men and art. He knows what he himself likes and wants in music, and despises conventional politeness toward the things he believes to be wrong. The professional writers upon music, who have to be diplomatic toward developments that in their heart of hearts they dislike, but that they feel to have a certain news value, have often to hedge in a way that would do credit to the most experienced bookmaker. Delius scorns to hedge; and his verdicts on some of his contemporaries have always been distinguished more for penetration than for flattery. His mind is a well-stored one, and his international associations have given him an exceptionally close acquaintance with all contemporary cultures. He is what Nietzsche would have called a good European.

He has faced, with extraordinary courage, an accumulation of misfortunes that would have taken the heart out of most men; and it is true that matters have been made easier for him by his financial independence and by the devotion of a

remarkable wife, whose clear-eyed calmness and fortitude are almost the equal of his own. He is still composing. The paralysis descended on him in 1922, and his sight failed him three years later; but in spite of these handicaps he composed, by dictation, his second violin sonata in 1923 and "A Late Lark" in 1925. During the last couple of years or so he has had with him a young Yorkshire musician who particularly understands him, and who has made the work of dictation easier for him, so that we may still expect further products of his genius.

The recent festival was not in the least a conventional demonstration of piety on the part of the public toward one who has suffered grievously in the battle of life. It was a spontaneous expression of delight in the music for its own sake, and of wonder that so many beautiful things should still be so little known. As I have said, the general feeling was one of surprise that with so pronouncedly personal an idiom a composer should be able to express so great a variety of moods; not the least of the mysteries is how a harmonic language that on the surface of it seems inclined to softness can on occasion say so much that is big and strong. It may be true that the basis of much of Delius's music is wistfulness, regret for the evanescent loveliness of things and for the tragedy of man's lot; but it is also true that there is no weakness, no sentimental self-pity in this regret—that this music is really a passionate Yes-saying, as Nietzsche would put it, to life, not a denial of it, for proof of which we have only to look at the magnificent "Mass of Life."

I remember Delius saying to me, about the time that this great work was being written, that the world had had enough masses for the dead, and that it was time it had a mass for the living. Half the fascination of his music as a whole is its paradoxical combination of a texture that seems soft and yielding and a mentality that is decidedly positive and vigorous.